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RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8886
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 06 RANGOON 000126

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP AND IO; PACOM FOR FPA

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (Classification upgraded to SECRET)

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: BURMA'S 2010 ELECTION: UNCERTAINTY PREVAILS AMIDST
A DIVERSITY OF OPINIONS

REF: A. RANGOON 68
[1](#)B. RANGOON 39
[1](#)C. 08 RANGOON 611
[1](#)D. 08 RANGOON 811
[1](#)E. 08 RANGOON 558
[1](#)F. 08 RANGOON 305

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Classified By: Pol Officer Sean O'Neill for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) One year after the Burmese regime announced parliamentary elections will be held in 2010, nothing is known about the timing of the vote, what rules will govern participation, and who will compete. In the absence of hard facts many potentially key players -- among opposition, pro-regime, and ethnic groups alike -- are struggling to determine the best approach to the elections and are holding off on any concrete action. The NLD privately says it will not participate, but the party has not publicly declared its position. Some other opposition groups -- including a "third force" of democracy advocates tied neither to the regime nor the traditional 1990-era parties -- are actively considering participating, believing that the admittedly flawed process could offer some opening to press for change. Meanwhile, a number of cease-fire ethnic groups are onboard with the regime's road map in theory, but have done little to convince their armed constituents of the benefits of participation. Even pro-regime organizations, which vocally tout the merits of the GOB's road map, demur when asked about concrete plans to participate in the elections. Only a few small parties have openly declared their intentions.

[1](#)2. (C) Positions will likely crystallize once the GOB announces the electoral rules of the game, but even then we expect a diversity of views on how to proceed, including among those genuinely opposed to the regime. (The senior generals' plan seems much clearer: using the election to create a nominal civilian government while the military

retains effective, though less overt, control). At this stage, we believe the USG should continue to press the regime for concrete actions on key human rights and democracy concerns, while stressing the basic requirements of a "free and fair election," which the regime has promised, noting the concept means much more than simply organizing a ballot. Beyond that we should remain flexible for now, and should refrain from picking sides or getting out in front of a political debate within and among pro-democracy groups here.

Information Vacuum Fuels Speculation

¶3. (C) Since announcing the 2010 parliamentary elections in February of 2008, the regime has publicly said little about its specific plans for timing, registration, and participation, despite propaganda touting the elections as a key component of the "roadmap to a discipline-flourishing democracy." Most recently, during a February 3 meeting, Prime Minister Thein Sein reportedly assured UN Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari that the GOB has been taking "all necessary measures" regarding the timing and organization of the vote and will reveal details at "an appropriate time." (Ref A)

¶4. (C) The absence of facts has fueled considerable speculation. Opposition media cite "informed sources" as predicting everything from the imminent release of the election law to a postponement of the vote itself. Even those who would normally be in a position to know are left to guess when and how the regime will announce its next move. Soe Yin, a retired professor and member of the GOB's constitutional drafting commission, speculated the GOB will probably wait until October. When pressed, none of our contacts can produce any hard facts to back up their

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forecasts. With so many predictions out there, it is likely one of them will be right, but probably only by chance.

The Regime and its Supporters

¶5. (C) Some of the regime's most vocal supporters publicly praise the election process and have declared their intention to participate. In a January 28 meeting, National Unity Party (NUP) General Secretary U Khin Maung Gyi described the 2010 vote as an important step towards democracy and national unity, and assured us his party will field candidates in each of Burma's 14 states and divisions. But when asked how the NUP would educate its purported 750,000 members on the fundamentals of democracy after such a long time without it, Khin Maung Gyi was vague, saying only that they would distribute pamphlets on "responsibility and democracy." The NUP leader was similarly evasive when asked about basic issues such as how the NUP will select its candidates, what the electoral laws will look like, and whether any other pro-regime organizations will participate. He was, however, clear about his confidence in the regime, saying the State Peace and Development Council has "all the necessary experience to conduct the election properly" without having to consult political parties or ethnic groups.

Politics could "get dirty" as 2010 approaches

¶6. (S) One notable exception to the silence emanating from Nay Pyi Taw is the newly-appointed head of Burma's civil service (and former Deputy Foreign Minister) Kyaw Thu. In a one-on-one meeting with the Charge on January 20, Kyaw Thu said he believes the senior generals have already selected a high-ranking group of officers to take off their uniforms and run in 2010 (Ref B). He claimed to have seen the list, but only gave Charge one name on it: the Mayor of Rangoon. In the end, Burma's ruling generals are "entrenched," he said, and see no benefit in change. However, Kyaw Thu described

how a second group, consisting of those who are dissatisfied with the past 20 years and see a need for change, may be forming within the regime. Kyaw Thu worried that politics could turn "dirty" in the second half of 2009, and expressed reluctance to get involved in the election.

USDA's role?

17. (SBU) For its part, the pro-regime mass member organization known as the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), has reportedly stepped up recruiting and "public relations" efforts throughout Burma, including the establishment of USDA medical clinics, agricultural loan programs, and other "charity" endeavors. Speculation is rampant that USDA is preparing to give birth to one or several political parties. Thus far, however, USDA officials remain silent on their plans for 2010. Most observers believe that the 26-million strong group -- only some of whom are avid; many join only under duress -- is intended by the regime to be a formidable political force in 2010.

The Opposition

18. (C) While the National League for Democracy (NLD) Central Executive Committee (CEC) has openly rejected the constitution and the May 2008 referendum as illegitimate, it has not yet taken a public stand on the 2010 elections. Party spokesman Nyan Win informed us that the Uncles are waiting for the regime's election law to be released before speaking out publicly. Privately, leading NLD members have informed us that the party does not intend to participate in the elections. Others close to the NLD's leadership, such as 1990 MPs-elect Pu Chin Sian Thang and Aye Thar Aung, have told us the NLD CEC views its primary goal to be the

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preservation of the party (Ref C). The Uncles are unlikely to take a stand that could endanger the NLD's status as a legally-registered political party.

19. (C) Despite the NLD's silence, several other political parties have chosen to speak out. In January, the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA), comprised of 13 political parties, publicly declared its intention to boycott the 2010 elections. These parties, which represent a variety of ethnic constituencies, trace their roots to the 1990 elections. Like the NLD, most are committed to the release of all political prisoners, the recognition of the 1990 elections, and a genuine tripartite dialogue with the regime.

110. (C) Some parties within the UNA have individually spoken out against the road map and 2010 elections. In October, Arakan League for Democracy Joint Secretary Aye Thar Aung told exile-based media that his party rejected the legitimacy of the regime's constitution and would not participate in the parliamentary elections (Ref D). On July 21, Zomi National Congress President Pu Chin Sian Thang and four other 1990 MPs-elect sent a letter to UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon declaring their intention to boycott the elections (Ref C). Both Pu Chin Sian Thang and Aye Thar Aung have lamented that the NLD, the country's largest and most broad-based opposition party, has not yet taken a similarly strong stand.

111. (C) The once active 88 Generation Students group has been thoroughly decimated by arrests since August 2007. Its top leaders, such as Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi, were sentenced to lengthy prison terms of up to 65 years in November 2008 and apparently will remain behind bars until well after 2010. Some 88GS members who remain free, such as Toe Kyaw Hlaing and Soe Htun, tell us they do not support participation in what they view as an inherently flawed election, although Toe Kyaw Hlaing has, in the past, said he sympathizes with the

arguments of those who are considering participating. He told us in August 2008, for example, that he supported "opening a new front" against the regime by forming a coalition of opposition groups to work towards a common goal of democratization, both through protest and the political process. Since then Toe Kyaw Hlaing has been inconsistent--alternating between favoring participation and supporting a boycott in line with what he expects the NLD to do. Given the fragile state of the 88GS and its members' security concerns, the question may be not whether they will choose to participate, but whether they can.

Cease-Fire Ethnic groups could play a key role

¶12. (C) Of all the players eyeing 2010, it is perhaps the ethnic cease-fire groups that could most drastically alter the landscape. Most retain their arms and many have large, young, and active memberships. Some, like the Wa, control their own territory to the exclusion of the Burma Army. As a result, many cease-fire groups are in a position to wield significant leverage against the GOB if dissatisfied with the results of the regime's road map. While most participated in the regime's 14-year National Convention in an attempt to shape the outcome to meet their key needs, the regime's failure to address key concerns over social, military, and economic issues has led to growing discontent, particularly among rank-and-file members. The continued participation of the cease-fire ethnic groups in the regime's road map is not a foregone conclusion and may prove critical to the outcome of Than Shwe's seven-step plan.

¶13. (C) Three key Kachin groups have agreed to form a political party and participate in the elections. Leading Kachin peace negotiator Saboi Jum informed us that leaders from the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), Kachin Defense Army (KDA), and New Democratic Army Kachin (NDAK)

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formed the Kachin Consultative Assembly (aka Kachin Consultative Council) in June 2008 (Ref E). Since then, he added, the assembly has agreed in principle to form a political party and intends to provide guidance so that candidates speak with one voice. While the assembly has publicly stated it will not transform into a party and will require members of its constituent groups to resign before participating in the elections, privately Saboi Jum acknowledges that its leaders will play a significant role in whatever political party emerges.

¶14. (C) Nonetheless, many within these Kachin cease-fire groups remain concerned the regime will use the constitution and elections to force them to disarm without addressing their key demands regarding autonomy and federalism (Ref F). Saboi Jum reported that the KIO, KDA, and NDAK have no intention of disarming before the GOB addresses their concerns, adding that as long as the regime continues to ignore key ethnic concerns, the possibility of renewed fighting remains a real, albeit distant, possibility.

¶15. (C) This sentiment is echoed by other key cease-fire ethnic groups. The New Mon State Party (NMSP) announced in January that it would not participate in the elections, citing that the group "did not get what we wanted at the constitutional convention." NMSP executive committee member Nai Shwe Thein went on publicly to warn that "if the military asks us to disarm, we will do something about it." In July a spokesman for the Shan State Army North (SSAN) denied media reports that the SSAN has decided to participate in the 2010 elections (Ref C). Since then the SSAN has remained conspicuously silent about the elections, saying only that it has not yet instructed its members on the matter.

¶16. (SBU) Those close to the United Wa State Party (UWSP) and its 20,000-man United Wa State Army (UWSA) have told the press that the Wa will take part in the elections only if the

regime accedes to a UWSP proposal to designate territory currently under Wa control as a special autonomous region by January 2010. The UWSP's move is viewed by many observers as a challenge for the regime to honor its commitment in the new constitution to form a "Wa Self Administered Division." This challenge comes amidst rising tensions between the UWSA and Burma Army after the junta's regional commander in the area, Major General Kyaw Phyo, reportedly instructed the UWSA to disarm and participate in the 2010 elections.

The Case for Participation

¶17. (C) Some local politicians, intellectuals, and businessmen are describing the emergence of a "third force" in Burmese politics. They advocate a pragmatic approach that is neither supportive of the current regime's abuses nor of what is characterized as the traditional opposition's unwillingness to compromise. They see no viable options for reform outside of the regime's election mechanism. They see some possibility to achieve a degree of political space via the election process. Given the limited options, they figure to participate, hoping they can create meaningful change while enhancing the country's stability.

¶18. (C) In recent, separate meetings with Charge, Khin Zaw Win, a former political prisoner, and Nay Win Maung, who heads local NGO cum think-tank Myanmar Egress, described a political "stakeholder's group," consisting of moderates from academia, business, NGOs, ethnic groups and erstwhile members of the traditional opposition (such as the NLD), both inside and outside the country. The group is neither pro-military nor pro-NLD, according to Khin Zaw Win, and views its goal as preparing people to participate effectively in politics. Khin Zaw Win stressed that all in the group view economic development as the key to Burma's future, and most accept that the military will continue to play a significant role for some time to come. The group will not transform itself

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into a party, but may act as a "loose coalition of parties" formed by its members. When asked, Khin Zaw Win acknowledged the group has taken no concrete steps as yet to prepare for ¶2010. Nay Win Maung told us he is quietly organizing training courses targeting potential candidates and campaign workers, funded primarily by the EU and European foundations. The stakeholders' group plans a follow-up meeting in Bangkok in March.

¶19. (C) Businessman and former political prisoner "Roland" Ye Htoon told Charge he is organizing the United Democratic Party of Myanmar (UDP) to participate in the 2010 elections. Ye Htoon said he expects the elections will be "fully rigged" and believes the regime has already allocated all of the parliamentary seats to its supporters. Nonetheless, Ye Htoon believes those interested in change will not be able to get anywhere without participating in the regime's process. Thus, he has contacted Nay Pyi Taw - he reportedly has contacts there - to see if the regime might allocate a modest portion of parliamentary seats to the UDP. Ye Htoon hopes that those UDP candidates thus "elected" could then influence the rest of parliament to enact a degree of political and economic reform. He said that the initial reaction has been receptive; but if the senior generals reject the concept, Ye Htoon will drop away, having made his last effort to try to assist a return to democracy.

¶20. (C) The 72 year old Ye Htoon told Charge he is working closely with former Democracy Party Chairman U Thu Wai. Ye Htoon said one of his selling points to the regime is that the UDP, as part of the democracy movement, might be able to help improve relations with the U.S. He believes the party can draw support in Kachin and Chin States, as well as from disaffected members of the NLD and other 1990 political parties. He said he has been in contact with KIO leader Tu Jar.

¶21. (C) Others with established track records of opposition to the regime are also advocating participation in the 2010 elections and the political process. In a meeting this month, 87-year-old Shan academic and politician U Shwe Ohn told us, "the 2008 constitution is the worst one yet," because it does not establish a true federation, is difficult to amend, and enshrines a "military class" that wields significant political and social power. Nonetheless, U Shwe Ohn said he intends to form a political party and participate in 2010 as part of a "real-politik" approach to Burma's problems. The constitution, deeply flawed as it is, was adopted and has become a "fait accompli." Thus, "we are in hell reaching for nirvana", instead of reaching for something more attainable. He believes that if democratic forces could get even 10-12 seats now and take a minority role, in another 10-15 years there could be real change. He added that the army itself has different opinions and he predicted there would be ways to shape the thinking of military members of a future parliament.

¶22. (C) Many ethnic cease-fire groups who appear willing to participate in the elections are motivated by the desire to secure a lasting political solution to the social, economic, and military issues most important to them. It was this desire that led them to participate in the 14-year-long National Convention, despite its obvious and glaring flaws, said former Karen National Convention delegate Simon Tha. Saboi Jum has told us that the leadership of the KIO remain hopeful that the elections and "roadmap to democracy" that spawned them, will provide an opportunity to address key issues in a peaceful manner. Other ethnic groups who hold out the possibility of participation, such as the Wa, appear motivated by the leverage the election gives them in extracting concessions by the regime.

Comment

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¶23. (C) No matter what shape the 2010 process takes, Burma appears very unprepared for its first election in 20 years. While the regime maintains its electoral silence in Nay Pyi Taw, opposition groups are limited to issuing statements. Meanwhile some ethnic groups grow more dissatisfied. Quiet calculations are under way, but with few exceptions potential election players remain in limbo as they wait to see the rules of the game. Whether by design or accident, the delay in promulgating laws or announcing an election timetable has strengthened the regime's hand, even as it takes other overt steps -- like cracking down on activists -- in its effort to control the outcome.

¶24. (C) With so much uncertainty, we believe USG efforts at this stage should focus on 1) continuing to press the regime for reform, including releasing political prisoners and creating the sorts of democratic mechanisms that could allow a "free and fair" election;" 2) educating the Burmese people about the democratic process to the extent possible so they can draw their own conclusions about the elections and act upon them; and 3) developing new, flexible assistance mechanisms that will allow the USG to respond quickly to developments and opportunities in Burma as they occur. While some Burma activists are asking Washington to preemptively condemn the election process, we believe it is the political players inside Burma who should make initial judgments. As of now, as described above, that debate is still evolving.

DINGER